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ABSTRACT

Suggesting that using children's literature as a tool for problem solving is a meaningful way for teachers to understand and help children with problems, this Digest claims that through the exploration of stories, discussion, and reflections on their own experiences, children can begin to perceive the complexities of the world in which they live. It offers suggested criteria for selecting literature to help children cope with problems; guidelines for using literature to help children cope with problems; resources for materials selection; and selected annotated bibliographies (on death, disabilities and illness, disaster, separation and divorce of parents, and violence). (RS)

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Using Literature to Help Children Cope With Problems

by Wei Tu

> "Am I? Am I going to catch AIDS from Uncle Tim?" Dad shook his head... "I go to Uncle Tim's a lot... I hug him. Sometimes we have dinner together"... "It's safe for you to be with Tim," he said. "...Mom and I asked Tim's doctor how safe it is for us to be close to him. The doctor said you can't catch AIDS just by taking care of someone"... My Uncle Tim died the next day... "I wish dying was like sunset"... "I wish Uncle Tim would come back again in the morning." (Jordan, 1989)

The paragraph above, from "Losing Uncle Tim" (Jordan, 1989), reflects a young boy's confusion and sadness on learning that his favorite relative is dying from a disease called AIDS. People in all times and places need to cope with problems about birth, separation, illness, and death. Children cannot escape from these problems. Through literature, children can perceive how others have encountered and resolved problems that cause sadness, stress, fear, and uncertainty. More importantly, children learn how to use conflict resolution strategies to deal with these problems.

Importance of using literature to help children cope with problems

The use of literature to help children cope with problems can be an important part of teaching. Through literature, children can understand that they are not alone in encountering problems. In using literature to help children cope with problems, teachers recognize that children today encounter many problems and they can then better understand and relate to children's feelings about these problems. Teachers can guide children in discussing their problems more freely. Through discussion, teachers and children can share their feelings, which will help teachers and children relate better to one another. From the literature, teachers and children work together to find different solutions for problems.

Suggested criteria for selecting literature to help children cope with problems

Burnett (1997), Huck, Helper, & Hickman (1993), Ouzts (1991), and Rudman (1995) recommend that literature to help children cope with problems should have these features:

- Be well written and appropriate to the child's developmental level.
- Provide stories using language familiar to children that is realistic in terms of their life experience.
- Honestly portray the condition and future possibilities for the characters. Illustrations should also portray problems in an honest and straightforward manner.
- Present multidimensional characters experiencing legitimate and relatable emotions.
- Offer potential for controversy.
- Explore the process of working out problems.
- Demonstrate clear channels of communication and responses to children's questions.
- Offer situations which generate genuine enthusiasm in the reader.

Guidelines for using literature to help children cope with problems

Literature can be used as an effective tool to help children deal with emotional and social problems. Through discussion of the problematic issues embodied in the literature, teachers can help children grapple with the issues presented. When using literature to help children cope with problems, educators should consider the purpose of the learning task, decide who will participate, and plan to relate the story character's problem to children's lived experiences (Jalongo, 1983).

Susan Miller (1997) proposes the following guidelines for teachers using literature to help children identify problems, and develop and implement solutions:

1. Identify --- Determine and discuss the problem. It should be meaningful, interesting, and appropriate for children.
2. Brainstorm --- Encourage children to think about possible solutions. Listen to and respect all of their ideas. Keep a record of the solutions suggested in case the children want to try more than one.
3. Select --- Help children examine the advantages and disadvantages of various solutions and then choose one that seems workable.
4. Explore and implement --- Let children gather the necessary materials and resources and then, if it is feasible, implement the solution they select.
5. Evaluate --- With the children, observe and discuss whether the solution to the problem was successful. If appropriate, help the children think of changes in the solution implemented, or encourage them to explore new solutions.

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Resources for Materials Selection

In addition to the criteria and guidelines for selecting and using literature to help children cope with problems, teachers should have access to resources for selecting materials. Specialized selection sources:

1. Cecil, N. L., & Robert, P. L. (1992). *Developing resiliency through children's literature: A guide for teachers and librarians, K-8.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co.
2. Dole, P. P. (1990). *Helping children through books: A selected booklist.* Portland, OR: Church and Synagogue Library Association.
3. Rasinski, T. V. (1992). *Sensitive issues: An annotated guide to children's literature, K-6.* Phoenix: Oryx Press.
4. *ResilienceNet Webmaster: Information for helping children and families overcome adversities.* (1999). http://resilnet.uiuc.edu/ [1999, December 12]
5. Rudman, M. (1995). *Children's literature: An issues approach.* (3rd edition). White Plains, NY: Longman.
6. *Vanderbilt's selected list of bibliographies on sensitive issues.* (1999). http://www.scils.rutgers.edu/special/kay/bookssen.html [1999, December 12]

Selected Annotated Bibliographies:

Death

1. *Children's books on death and dying.* (1997). http://www.penpages.psu.edu/penpages_reference/28507/285072304.html [1999, December 12]
2. Sullivan, A. (1993). *Death in literature for children and young adults.* Focused access to selected topics (Fast) Bib No. 62. Bloomington, IN: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills. [ED356485]
3. Smith, A. G. (1989). Reading guidance. Death and grief. *Journal of Poetry Therapy, 3* (1), 23-28

Disabilities and Illness

1. Cothern, N. B. (1993). *A bibliography of children's and young adult's books about illness issues.* [ED355532]
2. Cothern, N. B. (1994). Healing with books: Literature for children dealing with health issues. *Ohio Reading Teacher, 28* (2), 8-15. [EJ504787]
3. English, J., Pyles, A. A., & Wicker, A. (1991). *Drug education through Literature: An annotated bibliography for grades K-6.* Portland, OR: Western Regional Center for Drug-Free Schools and Communities. [ED338937]
4. Kupper, L. (1994). *A guide to children's literature and disability: 1989-1994.* Washington, D.C.: National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities.
5. Orr, L. E. (1997). Exploring developmental disabilities through literature: An annotated bibliography. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 29* (6), 14-15. [EJ549100]
6. Teasley, A. B. (1993). YA literature about AIDS: Encountering the unimaginable. *Alan Review, 20* (3), 18-23.

Disaster

1. McMath, J. S. (1997). Young children, national tragedy, and picture books. *Young Children, 52* (3), 82-84. [EJ544876]

Separation and Divorce of Parents

1. Rudman, M. (1993). *Books to help children cope with separation and loss: An annotated bibliography* (4th edition). New Providence, N.J.: R.R. Bowker.
2. Woodman, L. (1993). *Annotated bibliography for preadolescents from divorced families and their parents and teachers.* Plymouth State College. [ED360621]
3. *Books for children about divorce.* (1999). http://kidshealth.org/parent/community/resource_divorce.html#children_book [1999, December 12]
4. *Seattle Public Library: Children's books about divorce.* (1998). http://www.spl.lib.wa.us/children/divorcebks.html [1999, December 12]
5. *Divorce books for children.* (No date). http://www.hooked.net/~franalan/Divorce_Assistance/books.html [1999, December 12]

Violence

1. Rudin, C. (1998). *Children's books about the holocaust. A selective annotated bibliography.* Bayside, N.Y.: Holocaust Resource Center & Archives.
2. Letvin, A. Z. (1996). Literature for children and young adults: Examining Issues of violence and conflict resolution. http://www.civiced.org/bibliography_violence.html [1999, December 12]
3. Banaszak, R. A., & Banaszak, M. K. (1997). Trade books for reducing violence. *Social Education, 61* (5), 270-71.

Using children's literature as a tool for problem solving is a meaningful way for teachers to understand and help children with problems. Through the exploration of stories, discussion, and reflections on their own experiences, children can begin to perceive the complexities of the world in which they live.

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Huck, C. S., Hepler, S., & Hickman, J. (1993). *Children's literature in the elementary school.* Forth Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace.

Jalongo, M. (1983). Bibliotherapy: Literature to promote socioemotional growth. *The Reading Teacher, 36,* 796-802. [EJ276258]

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Ouzts, D. T. (1991). The emergence of bibliotherapy as a discipline. *Reading Horizons, 31* (3), 199-206. [EJ421420]

Riecken, T. J., & Miller, M. R. (1990). Introducing children to problem solving and decision making by using children's literature. *Social Studies, 81* (2), 59-64. [EJ413991]

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